

West Slovakia

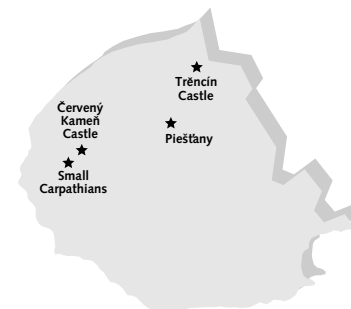


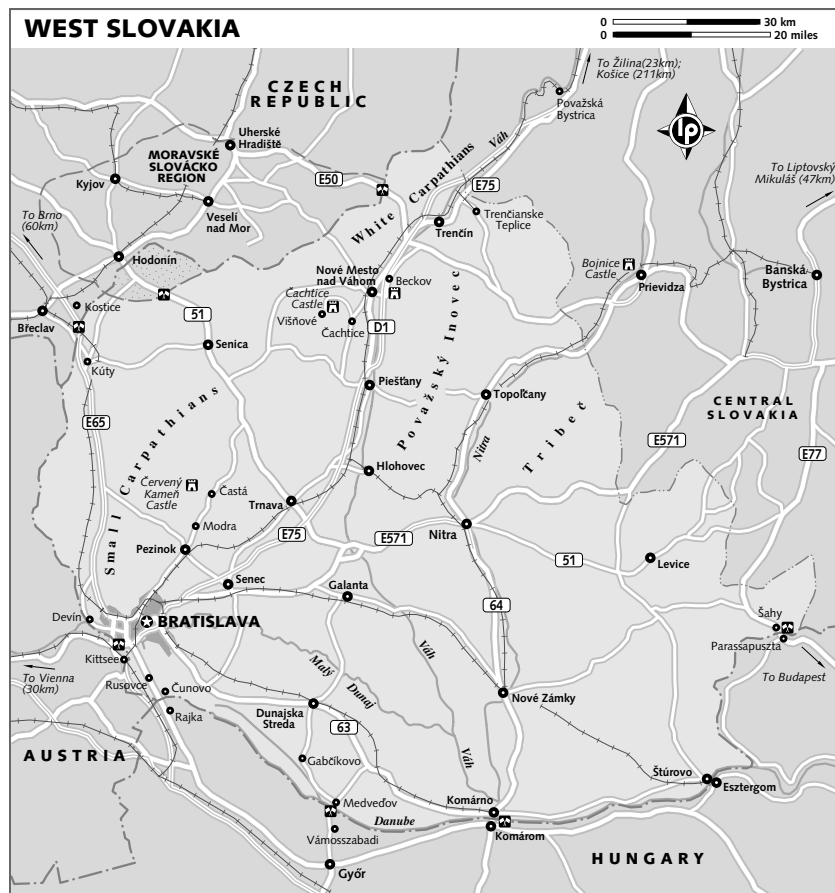
All of West Slovakia might be considered a day trip from Bratislava. It's a region of therapeutic and rejuvenating spas, romantic and ruined castles, vineyard-covered hills and lowland plains. Here the vast Danubian basin meets the Small Carpathian hills, and cliffs rise above the Váh river valley. The region's towns, many of which are mentioned in the earliest Slovak chronicles, are a mix of old and new. Architectural gems cuddle up next to communist-era monstrosities, as in the spa town of Piešťany.

Perhaps most striking, though, are the ancient fortifications rising high on lonely ridges or dominating towns, such as in Trenčín, a vivid reminder of West Slovakia's strategic importance. The region was once the Hungarian Empire's last stand against the invading Turks as they pushed north to occupy Budapest for 150 years (and barely missed taking nearby Vienna). It's a rare clifftop in the region that doesn't have some sort of castle ruins perched aloft, and in the southern reaches of the region, Hungarian is still heard on the streets at least as often as Slovak. West Slovakia is today, as it has long been, the place of clashing cultures.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Be wrapped naked in mud in the neoclassical spa town of **Piešťany** (p360)
- Hike up to the meticulously restored **Trenčín castle** (p363)
- Take a leisurely tour of the wine country of the **Small Carpathians** (p356), but make sure to bring a designated driver
- Brush up on your falconry skills at **Červený Kameň castle** (p357)





Getting There & Away

A convenient train line runs northeast from Bratislava through Trnava, Piešťany and Trenčín on its way towards Košice.

For travel to Nitra and Komárno, buses are a better deal, as trains are either slower or involve tedious connections.

The E75, Slovakia's longest stretch of motorway, runs from Bratislava to Považská Bystrica via Piešťany and Trenčín. Construction continues with the goal of making the motorway connect all the way through eastern Slovakia to the Ukraine.

To get between Trnava and Nitra, take Hwy 51.

Most other roads are small but in good condition.

SMALL CARPATHIANS

Rolling hills stretch for 100km northeast from Bratislava. The undulating Small Carpathians (Malé Karpaty) are not especially mountain-like, but the woodlands are pleasant for hiking, and the soil is ripe. Vineyards extend right down to the outskirts of Bratislava. Also in the region is the fine Červený Kameň castle, and Modra, a small town where in addition to wine the nation's most colourful and well-known ceramics are made.

Modra

☎ 033 / pop 8660

A sleepy little town, Modra makes a pleasant stop on a wine-tasting tour. Frankovka Modra grapes produced in the area form a ruby-

red, low-acid wine with hints of cinnamon. Modra not only produces Slovakia's best red wines but is also celebrated for its ceramics. *Modranský keramic* is glazed majolica pottery decorated with flowers and folk-art motifs; yellow and blue are the dominant accent colours on a white field.

Modra is also the town where the Slovak nationalist Ludovít Štúr (1815–56) spent his later years, and there's a small museum dedicated to him.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The town centres on the main street, Štúrova, which runs past the bus stop before changing its name to Dukelská. The **Small Carpathian Tourist Information Office** (☎ 647 4302; www.tik.sk, www.modra.sk; Štúrova 84; ☎ 9.30am–4.30pm Mon–Fri) sells maps and can help with winery visits. There's an ATM a few doors down.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Choose from among the several *vináreň* (wine bar–restaurants) and wine shops (where you can also taste) in and around Modra's main street. Even restaurants have lengthy lists of local wine sold by the decilitre (usually priced from 15Sk to 30Sk). Shop at **Pavúk** (☎ 647 5039; Štúrova 92; ☎ 10am–8pm Mon–Sat), or settle in for more leisurely consideration at the small, associated café. **Vináreň u Ludvíka** (☎ 0915408350; Dukelska 2; mains 140–245Sk) is everything a Slovak wine restaurant should be: it's in a 300-year-old cellar with cobblestone fireplace and fur-covered wooden benches. Twenty-seven regional wines are available. Both the café at Pavúk and Vináreň u Ludvíka serve food.

Watch artisans hand-painting vases and jugs and then buy your own at the ceramics factory **Slovenská ľudová majolika** (☎ 647 2942;

Dolná 138; www.majolika.sk; admission free; ☎ 8.30am–4.30pm Mon–Fri). Weekend tours are available by arrangement.

Keep pressing the buzzer if the little **Ludovít Štúr Museum** (Štúrova 50; adult/student 20/10Sk; ☎ 9am–4pm Tue–Fri, 9am–3pm Sat) appears to be closed. Here, in what used to be the town hall, you'll find the writing desk of Ludovít Štúr, 19th-century nationalist, linguist and poet.

SLEEPING

Modra, 24km northeast of Bratislava, can easily be done as a day trip, but if you're stuck overnight, **Penzión Club MKM** (☎ 647 5313; Štúrova 25; r 680–1200Sk; ☎ 647 5313) is in a pleasant old neo-classical building. Updated add-ons include a fitness room, *foosball* (table football) and a bowling lane.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses leave for Modra several times every hour from Bratislava's main station (40Sk, 45 minutes). There are frequent bus connections to and from Trnava on weekdays, but only three on weekends (47Sk, one hour).

Around Modra

ČERVENÝ KAMEŇ

Wandering up the forest path to **Červený Kameň** (Red Stone; ☎ 649 5132; www.snm.sk; grounds admission free; ☎ 9am–5pm May–Aug, 9am–4pm Mar–Apr & Sep–Oct, 9.30am–3.30pm Nov–Feb) you get the feeling the Pálffy family might have felt lonely being so isolated from the village, high above the trees. But, then again, they did have a *castle* to fill with people. Queen Constance, wife of Czech king Přemysl, Otakar I, first built Červený Kameň in about 1230 in woodlands roughly 5km north of Modra. In the late 16th century the Pálffys dismantled the castle bit by bit to

THE WINE WAY

The **Small Carpathian Wine Way** (Malokarpatská viná cesta; www.mvc.sk) promotes vintners and events. Pick up a *Malokarpatská viná cesta* map (1:75,000) at the tourist office in Modra; it lists local wineries and castles, and shows colour-coded walking trails. The area around **Pezinok** (☎ 641 2550; www.pezinok.sk; tourist office, Radničné nám 9; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri) is known for light whites; Modra is famous for its dry reds. You can take a bus between Bratislava and Pezinok (25Sk, 30 minutes, at least half-hourly) and on from Pezinok to Modra (10Sk, 12 minutes, every 15 minutes).

On one weekend in mid-November most of the winemakers from Bratislava to Trnava participate in **Open Cellar Day** (Deň otvorený pivnič; ☎ 643 3489; www.mvc.sk; ☎ 1–7pm). For 800Sk you get a map, a wine glass and a pass entitling you to tastings at dozens of wineries along the 40km route. Unfortunately, there's no tour bus to shuttle you between them. You can take buses between the big towns, or negotiate to hire a driver in Bratislava.

remake it into a deluxe fortified palace. They went on remodelling it until they fled Czechoslovakia in 1945. The castle suffered some damage in WWII and was subsequently confiscated by the government. Restoration began in 1947 and today it is mostly complete.

Walk up from the car park past the **fall-cony yard** (adult/concession 65/35Sk; ☎ shows 12.15pm, 2.15pm, 4.15pm) and you have free access to climb around the outer walls or have a coffee in the inner courtyard café. To see the inside of the palace and cellar, you have to join a tour (adult/student 130/70Sk). Most of the rooms are set up as if the Pálffy family had just stepped out. The gigantic cellar is 78m long by 9m high (and is available for parties). Here you can see where the iron oxide has stained the rock red, giving the castle its name.

Just outside the gate, **Taverna pod bastou** (☎ 690 5869; mains 120-170Sk) serves a full menu and has a fine terrace.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

The easiest way to travel the 5km north of Modra is by car. During the week buses depart every few minutes from Bratislava (53Sk, one hour) via Modra (14Sk, ¼ hour) to Častá village (get off at the Zakladina stop); on weekends only three buses make the trip. From Zakladina, Červený Kameň is 1km west (30 minutes' walk up) on the green-marked trail.

TRNAVA

☎ 033 / pop 69,140

History is what attracts most people to Trnava. Slovakia's oldest town was the first to get a royal charter as a free borough (from Hungarian king Béla IV in 1238), and has a good part of the medieval town walls still intact. Trnava was once the seat of Hungarian Catholicism, and there are a few churches (and two synagogues) worth seeing. The old town centre is pleasant enough, but the most ancient elements were hidden when the town was remodelled in baroque style during the 1700s. The baroque is mostly what's reflected today. Sadly, some of the historic buildings are crumbling, and industrialisation and communist style have affected the town.

History

Lying on the Prague-Budapest and Vienna-Kraków trade routes, Trnava was already one of Hungary's biggest and wealthiest towns by the 13th century. After the 1526 Turkish vic-

tory at Mohács, the archbishops of Esztergom transferred their seat here, and beefed up the town walls. One after another, Catholic Orders moved in with churches, monasteries and schools. The Jesuit university, founded in 1635, was the only university in Hungary at the time (the University church of St John the Baptist is still the town's star attraction). But all good things must end and in 1777 Empress Maria Theresa had the entire university moved to Budapest, and in 1820 the archbishops went back to Esztergom. (An archbishop wasn't again seated in Trnava until 1987.)

The town's other claim to historical fame is that Anton Bernolák, codifier of the standardised Slovak language, founded the Slovak Learned Society (Slovenské učené tovaríšstvo) here in 1792. The soon-to-be Czechoslovak city industrialised early (the first steam train in Slovakia left here in 1872) and thoroughly. Manufacturing is still the city's mainstay, led by Peugeot-Citröen, which built a manufacturing plant on the outskirts in 2003.

Orientation

The bus and train stations are south of the old town centre, the heart of which is Trojičné nám. Pedestrian Hlavná runs into the square. You could easily see all of Trnava's attractions in a half-day trip from Bratislava.

Information

City Police (☎ 551 1555; Trhová 3)

Heso Com (Hviezdoslavova 13; per hr 30Sk; ☎ 10am-midnight) Internet access.

Hospital (☎ 553 6103; Andreja Žarnova 11)

Main post office (Trojičné nám 4)

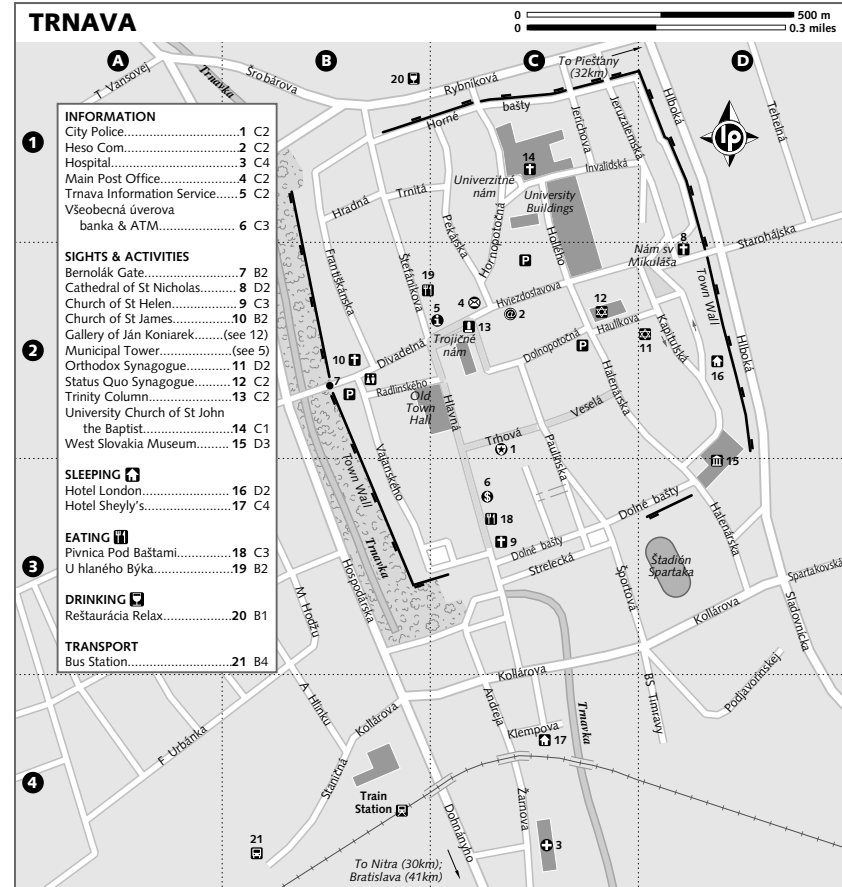
Trnava Information Service (TINS; ☎ 551 1022; www.trnava.sk; Trojičné nám 1; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat May-Sep, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr) in the Municipal Tower.

Všeobecná úverová banka (VÚB; Hlavná 31) This bank has an ATM.

Sights

UNIVERSITY DISTRICT

In the baroque neighbourhood around the old university is one of Slovakia's finest churches, the huge **University church of St John the Baptist** (Univerzitný kostol sv Jána Krstiteľa; Univerzitné nám), designed by Pietro Spezzo and built by Italian and Viennese artisans between 1629 and 1637. Though severe-looking on the outside, it's all lush baroque and rococo inside, with a beautiful altar reaching to the ceiling.



Named after the patron saint of merchants, the **Cathedral of St Nicholas** (Dóm sv Mikuláša; nám Mikuláša) was founded as a Gothic parish church in about 1380, and promoted to the status of a cathedral when the archbishops arrived from Esztergom. It was given a baroque face-lift in the 17th century and a new interior in the 18th century.

Southwest from St Nicholas is all that remains of Trnava's 19th-century Jewish heritage. The **Status Quo Synagogue** houses the **Gallery of Ján Koniarik** (☎ 551 4657; www.gjk.sk; Halenárska 2; adult/student 30/15Sk; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 1-6pm Sat & Sun). The small but impressive collection here mixes modern art with Jewish artefacts. The ruins of the **Orthodox Synagogue** (Havlíka) are in sad, sad shape.

AROUND TROJIČNÉ NÁM

Restored brick town walls, first built between the 13th and 16th centuries, stretch almost completely around the historical centre. In the west wall is the **Bernolák gate** (Bernolákova brána), the only surviving tower. Through the gate and past the Franciscans' 1640 **Church of St James** (Kostol sv Jakuba; ☎ 551 1211; Františkánska; adult/student 30/15Sk; ☎ 1-4pm Mon & Fri, 9-11am & 1-4pm Tue-Thu, 9-11am Sat) is the main square, Trojičné nám. It's dominated by a Renaissance **Municipal tower** (Mestská veža; Trojičné nám 1; adult/student 30/15Sk; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Jun-Sep), built in 1574 but with a baroque top, which provides views of the city. The 17th-century **Trinity Column** in the square, removed by the communists in 1948, was replaced in 1989 by popular demand.

Be sure to wander past Trnava's oldest building, the lonely **Church of St Helen** (Kostol sv Helena; Hlavná), at the south end of the pedestrian district. Built in the early 14th century, it's still pure early Gothic (except for a 19th-century steeple).

WEST SLOVAKIA MUSEUM

South from Kapitulská is a handsome former Clarist convent, dating from 1239. After Emperor Joseph II abolished the monasteries, it was used as a veterans' home and a mental hospital until the 1950s. American pilots were apparently hidden here during WWII. Now it houses the **West Slovakia museum** (Západoslovenské múzeum; ☎ 551 2913; Múzejné nám 3; adult/student 40/20Sk; ☎ 8am-5pm Tue-Fri, 11am-5pm Sat & Sun). Look for the displays on Slovak Olympic medallists, and the antique menorahs and Torahs from the local Jewish community.

Sleeping

There's not a whole lot of reason to stay in Trnava for a second day, but if you want to, there are numerous accommodation options, several of which are on Kapitulská.

Hotel Sheyly's (☎ 0905360036; Klempova 2; www.sheylys.sk; r 1150Sk; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Hip, spacious rooms await just outside the pedestrian centre. The fun continues in the lively, 1950s-style cocktail bar downstairs.

Hotel London (☎ 534 0586; www.hotellondon.sk; Kapitulská 5; s/d 1900/2500Sk; ☎ ☎) Shiny stainless-steel light fixtures complement clean-lined low-to-the-ground furnishings in a modern aesthetic. Deep-coloured paint on accent walls (turquoise, claret red) adds a pop of colour. Even the little bar is sophisticated.

Eating & Drinking

Most places in town offer a two-course lunch menu for about 100Sk.

Pivnica pod baštami (☎ 551 4049; Hlavná 45; mains 65-120Sk; ☎ closed Sun) Sautéed, grilled or stuffed, chicken seems to be the house meat of choice, but there are a few pasta and veggie options. Dine on the covered terrace or down in the brick-vaulted *pivnice* (cellar).

U hlaného Býka (☎ 551 4452; Štefánikova 3; mains 89-350Sk) Pub food, pizza...and steak. In a nation that loves meat, a good steak is surprisingly hard to find. Not so here at 'the Bull'.

For drinks, Hotel Sheyly's 1950s dinerlike bar, with its occasional live concerts and range of 150-plus cocktails, is quite the happenin'

place; **Reštaurácia Relax** (☎ 551 1323; Rybníková 15) has a marvellous beer garden with cushioned outdoor furniture to relax into.

Getting There & Away

Express trains leave Bratislava at least 11 times per day for Trnava (82Sk, 40 minutes) and continue on to Trenčín (118Sk, one hour). Frequent buses connect to Nitra (74Sk, one hour, half-hourly).

From Trnava a spur train line heads over the Small Carpathians to Kúty (84Sk, 1½ hours, eight daily) in the Czech Republic.

PIEŠŤANY

☎ 033 / pop 29,950

There was a time when spas were medical facilities where a doctor's prescription was required and the minimum 'cure' was several weeks long. Not so today. In recent years, Piešťany's Spa Island administration has figured out that hot water means cool cash. Slovakia's premier spa is undergoing a renaissance of sorts. Steam rises from the pond as ducks waddle out of it, past a neoclassical building sporting a fresh coat of Maria Theresa yellow paint. Eucalyptus-scented whirlpool baths and chamomile rubs have been added to the list of services.

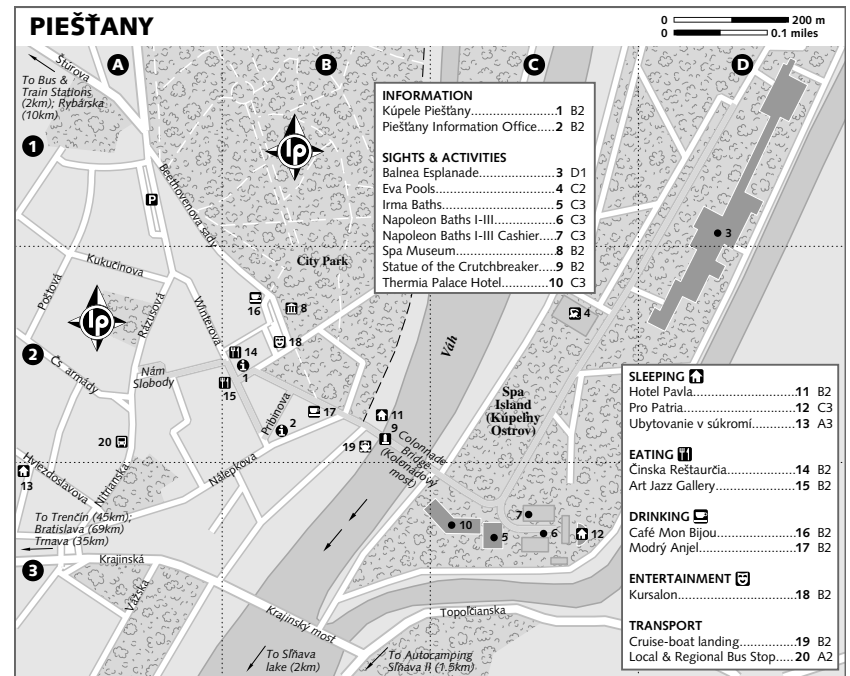
Old buildings at the spa are being restored one by one, and the communist-clumsy structures...well, you just have to ignore them. As you stroll along the paths and through the treatment halls, you hear a cacophony of languages. This should be no surprise because international travellers have been coming here to rest, recoup and rejuvenate since the 16th century. As other patrons pass by and you smell a faint whiff of rotten eggs, remember that the sulphur in the water has healing properties.

Orientation

The town itself is centred on the pedestrian streets around Winterova, flanked to the north by the city park. Bathing facilities, pools and spa hotels are to the east on Spa Island (Kúpeľný ostrov). The train and bus stations sit side by side 2km northwest of the town centre.

Information

The **Piešťany Information Office** (☎ 771 9622; www.pic.piestany.sk; Pribinova 2; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat, 2-6pm Sun) can help with information



about the town and non-Spa Island accommodations and events. The office stays open until 8pm weekdays from May to September. There's one slow computer with internet access (50Sk per hour) in the corner. For information on week-long spa treatment plans, inquire at the **Kúpele Piešťany** (☎ 775 2198; www.spa-piestany.sk; Winterova 29; ☎ 7am-5pm Mon-Fri) spa office; for day services go directly to the Spa Island cashier (see below). Banks and services are on Winterova.

Sights & Activities

The town, although it has a few modest Art Nouveau buildings, is pretty nondescript. Numerous trails crisscross the large city park, which is home to a small **Spa museum** (Balneologické múzeum; ☎ 772 2875; www.balneomuzeum.sk; Beethovenova sady; adult/student 30/15Sk; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Tue-Sun) with ethnographic and spa history displays.

Functionalist **Colonnade bridge** (Kolonádový most), designed and built in 1932, serves as a platform for Therae Piešťany's (trade-marked) symbol, the **statue of the crutchbreaker**. Into the bridge's glass walls are etched pastoral

scenes by 20th-century Slovak artist Martin Benka, which were saved by residents before the Nazis blew it up (it was reconstructed in 1956). Once across the bridge you are on **Spa Island** (Kúpeľný ostrov). At the time of writing, the island's two Art-Nouveau jewels, **Thermia Palace Hotel** and **Irma baths** (both built 1912) were under construction, but they should be fully restored and reopened by mid-2007.

Straight ahead from Irma baths, the 1821 neoclassical buildings **Napoleon baths I-III** (Napoleónske kúpele I-III) are home to mud pools, mineral pools, massage rooms and a salt cave. You can sign up for services at the **cashier** (kasa; www.spa-piestany.sk; Napoleon 1; ☎ 7.30am-7pm). A 45-minute mud wrap is the most expensive treatment at 800Sk; a 20-minute massage costs about 440Sk; and a 20-minute soak in the thermal 'mirror' pool is 400Sk. An immersion mud bath requires a medical exam. Some of the treatments are in the nearby hotels.

You don't need a reservation to swim in the warm mineral waters of the **Eva Pools** (Kúpalňa Eva; adult/child 150/50Sk; ☎ 9am-6pm May-Sep, 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 1-6pm Sat & Sun Oct-Apr). The 25m indoor pool and 50m outdoor pool were both built

in 1934. The **Balne Esplanade** (☎ 775 5395; www.spa-piestany.sk; Kúpeľný ostrov 29) is part of the Danubia Health Spa Resort brand. Anchoring the northern Spa Island complex, it has its own spa services and 'water and sauna world', which contains connected indoor and outdoor pools, whirlpools, steam rooms, dry saunas and a fancy gargoyle or two.

To the south of the town centre the Váh river is dammed, forming the sizable Sĺňava lake. Between the months of June and October, it's possible to enjoy an hour-long **cruise** (☎ 0905250164; 120Sk; ☞ 9am-5pm) on the lake; boats leave from just south of Colonnade bridge.

Sleeping

Kúpele Piešťany (www.spa-piestany.sk) administers island spas and hotels and has package rates on its website.

Autocamping Sĺňava II (☎ 762 3563; http://camp.piestany.webpark.sk; sites per person/tent 80/80Sk, 4-person bungalow 860Sk) If you're on a tight budget, try this camp site 1.5km south of Spa Island.

Ubytovanie v súkromí (☎ 0904129700; grofova@nurch.sk; Hviezdoslavova 25; r with shared bathroom per person 400Sk) Book to stay where a family rents basic one- to four-bed rooms in its big private house just off the pedestrian zone.

Pro Patria (☎ 775 6262; www.spaPiestany.com; Kúpeľný ostrov; r €39; P) Completed in 1916 during WWI, the Pro Patria opened just in time to serve as a hospital for 500 soldiers. Today the pink spa hotel has 101 pastel-and-white rooms upstairs, and mud treatments and mineral pools on ground level.

Hotel Pavla (☎ 7734 222; Sad Andreja Kmeťa 76; www.hotelpavla.com; r €115-145; P ☞ ☞ ☞) This is where modern elegance meets 1920s design. Upscale touches in this restored hotel, opened in 2005, include high-end linen, brushed-nickel fixtures and a rooftop hot tub.

Eating & Drinking

Čínska Reštaurácia (☎ 772 5122; Alexander Centrum; mains 88-200Sk) The Chinese mother-daughter team here serves great food. Set menus at lunch cost around 100Sk.

Art Jazz Gallery (☎ 7625 559; Winterova 29; mains 90-250Sk; ☞ to 1am Fri & Sat) Jazz bands sometimes play in this rambling, eclectic café. The food is an improvisation on Slovak themes: *palacinky* (crepes) filled with salmon mousse instead of sweets, and *halušky* (dumplings) with spinach instead of bacon, for example.

Cake- and coffee-wise, you can go old world at parkside **Café Mon Bijou** (Beethovenova sady 16; cakes 30-110Sk), or new age at the supermodern **Modrý Anjel** (Sad Andreja Kmeťa 28; cakes 45-150Sk; ☞).

Entertainment

Some Slovak citizens do use the national health system to stay on the island for weeks and weeks; from June to September frequent oldies concerts and gypsy evenings at the **Kursalon** (☎ 775 7531; www.kursalon.sk; Beethovenova sady 5) in the city park keep them dancing. (No, it's not cutting edge, but you're trying to relax, remember?)

Getting There & Away

Piešťany is 35km northeast of Trnava and 66km from Bratislava. There are 11 fast trains daily from Bratislava (130Sk, 1½ hour) via Trnava (62Sk, 30 minutes) that continue on to Trenčín (76Sk, 40 minutes). A bus ride from Bratislava takes 1½ hours and costs 30Sk less than the train.

Getting Around

Almost every local bus runs between the train and bus stations and the town centre (12Sk); get off at the Nitrianska stop in town.

ČACHTICE & BECKOV CASTLES

In the 17th century a mad Hungarian countess named Alžbeta Báthory (known as Bloody Liz to her mates) tortured and murdered more than 600 peasant women at **Čachtice castle** (Čachtický hrad), where she was eventually imprisoned. Legend has it that she bathed in her victims' blood to keep her skin young, but that's largely been dismissed by scholars. A fire destroyed the castle in 1708 and the ruins aren't much to look at today, but atop the castle hill you have great views of the adjacent regional nature reserve, and can experience an eerie, lonely feeling.

There are no roads leading directly to the freely accessible site. The castle is a 25-minute trail hike from the small village of Višňové, where there's a pub. To get to Višňové from Bratislava, take the train to Nové Mesto nad Váhom (146Sk, 1½ hours, 109km, 12 daily), then switch to a train for Višňové (12Sk, 15 minutes, four daily, six on weekends). From Trenčín to Nové Mesto nad Váhom (52Sk, 25 minutes), there are 11 trains daily. It's tricky to coordinate, so check return schedules carefully at www.zsr.sk.

Another one of Alžbeta's horrific castle playgrounds, **Beckov** (☎ 777 7125; Beckov village; adult/student 60/30Sk; ☞ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun May-Sep) is 5km north of Nové Mesto nad Váhom. Like Čachtice, this 12th-century castle was destroyed by fire in the 1700s, but more of it survived and it was partially reconstructed in 1996. Though still largely in ruins, you can tour the furnished palace and chapel.

Again, it's challenging to get here without a car. You can take the train to Nové Mesto nad Váhom and from there, on weekdays only, 12 buses run to Beckov village (14Sk, 20 minutes). Hike the 10 minutes up to the castle from the village.

TRENČÍN

☎ 032 / pop 56,850

What's not to like about a place with a mighty cliff-top castle, pretty Renaissance buildings and a lively university population?

Here you could easily spend a couple of days touring the Roman fortress, day-tripping out to Beckov castle (opposite) or the spa town Trenčianske Teplice (p366), or revelling at night-time. There are several small museums in town, including an excellent contemporary Czech and Slovak art museum.

For centuries Trenčín castle has guarded the southwestern gateway to Slovakia, where the Váh river valley begins to narrow between the White Carpathians (Bílé Karpaty) and the Strážov hills. Roman legionnaires established the outpost of Laugaricio here in the 2nd century; a rock inscription dated AD 179 proves it. This was the northernmost Roman camp in Eastern Europe.

The castle that now towers above the town was first mentioned in 1069 in a Viennese chronicle. In the 13th century the castle's master, Matúš Čák, held sway over much of Slovakia, and in 1412 Trenčín obtained the rights of a free royal city. The present castle dates from the 15th century, and although both castle and town were destroyed by fire in 1790, much has been restored.

Modern Trenčín is an important centre for the Slovak textile industry and a bustling little community.

Orientation

From the adjacent bus and train stations, walk west through the city park MR Štefánika and underneath the highway past the Hotel Tatra, left uphill on Mierové nám.

To the east, through an ancient town gate, Mierové meets Štúrovo nám, also a pedestrian plaza. The entire centre is easily walkable.

Information

Cultural Information Centre (☎ 161 86; www.trencin.sk; City Office, Sládkovičova; ☞ 8am-6pm May-Sep, 8am-5pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr) Helpful, well-informed staff.

Dom Knihy (Hviezdoslavova 13; ☞ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Bookstore with a good selection of hiking maps and travel books.

Main post office (Mierové nám 21)

Mike Studio (Mierové nám 25; per min 1Sk; ☞ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10pm Sun) Just internet, no café.

Police Station (☎ 159; Štúrovo nám 10)

Všeobecná úverová banka (VÚB; ☎ 741 7111; Mierové nám 37)

Sights

TRENČÍN CASTLE

Dominating a rocky crag above the old town, **Trenčín castle** (Trenčiansky hrad; ☎ 743 5657; adult/student 80/40Sk; ☞ 9am-5.30pm May-Oct, to 3.30pm Nov-Apr) is difficult to miss – especially at night when it's lit with green and purple spotlights. You have a hike to get here, but from the ramps you're rewarded with sweeping views of the Váh river plain. Much of the series of fortifications and palaces you'll see is a reconstruction.

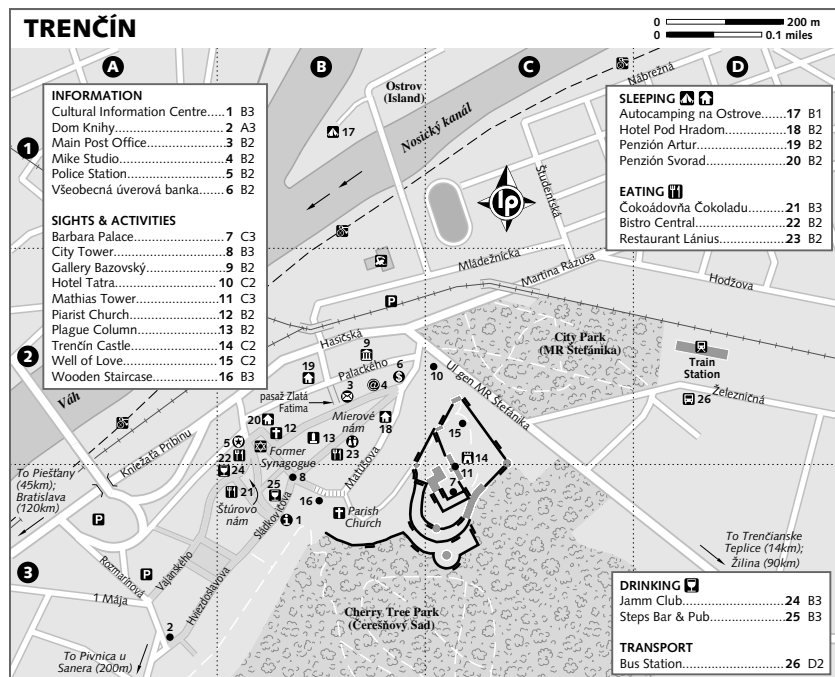
The **Well of Love**, purportedly dug by a man trying to win his lover back from servitude in the castle, was probably dug by Hapsburg soldiers.

To go inside the upper castle's three palaces, which are filled with decorative and fine artwork and weaponry, you have to join one of the frequent tours (in Slovak only; call two days ahead to arrange an English-speaking guide).

The oldest remaining structures are parts of a Slavic rotunda (9th or 10th century), beneath the **Barbara Palace**, and the **Mathias Tower** (11th century), with an observation gallery.

There are events almost daily in summer, including concerts and **historical performances** (www.trencin.sk).

The best time to tour is on an evening when torch-lit, two-hour **medieval night tours** (adult/student 100/50Sk; ☞ 9pm, various evenings) take you past knights and knaves sword-fighting, minstrels performing, and the staging of other scenes from the period.



MIEROVÉ NÁM & AROUND

The famous Roman inscription of AD 179 is on the cliff behind the **Hotel Tatra** (☎ 650 6111; www.hotel-tatra.sk; Ulica gen MR Štefánika 2) and can only be seen through a viewing window on the hotel's staircase. Ask at the reception for permission to see it. The translation reads: "To the victory of the emperor and the army which, numbering 855 soldiers, resided at Laugaricio. By order of Maximianus, legate of the 2nd auxiliary legion".

Temporary exhibits at the **Gallery Bazovský** (☎ 743 6858; http://gmab.scot.sk in Slovak; Palackého 27; adult/student 40/105k; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) are a great representation of contemporary Czech and Slovak artists. The permanent collection includes works by local abstract painter Miloš Bazovský (1899–1968).

The pleasant Mierové nám, lined with Renaissance burghers' houses, is dominated at its west end by the **Piarist church** (Piaristický kostol), built in baroque style in 1657. In the centre of the square is a **plague column** that dates from 1712.

You can climb the **City tower** (Mestská brána; ☎ 650 4317; Sládkovičova; adult/student 30/155k; ☎ 10am-

8pm Jun-Sep) above the old town's only remaining gate. South of the tower, a 16th-century covered **wooden staircase** (Kryté schody) climbs to a bright-yellow 14th-century **Parish church** (Farský kostol) that has a simple outline bearing Gothic, Renaissance and baroque traces. The adjacent small cemetery chapel is probably the only purely Gothic building in town. From here you can ascend to the castle gate.

Sleeping

Trenčín has many more *penzións* (guest-houses) than we can list; ask at the tourist office if the ones listed here are full.

Autocamping na Ostrove (☎ 743 4013; http://web.viapvt.sk/autocamping.tn; sites per car/tent 50/705k, per person in hut 2005k; ☎ May-15 Sep) This decent camping ground on an island in the Váh river is within walking distance of the city centre. Two- to five-bed *chaty* (huts) are for rent, in addition to field space for tents.

Penzión Svorad (☎ 743 0322; www.svorad-trencin.sk; Palackého 4; s 450-8005k, d 700-12005k; ☎) Frayed curtains, peeling linoleum – but oh, the castle views! It's clear this utilitarian dorm was part of an old grammar school; the staff are still

quite rule oriented. Absolutely no smoking (or you'll be kicked out).

Penzión Artur (☎ 748 1029; www.arturnn.sk; Palackého 23; s/d/tr 1200/1500/20005k) A wine restaurant and street café add to the appeal of this colourful old-town inn. Rooms are modern modular, nothing special.

Hotel Pod Hradom (☎ 744 2507; www.podhradom.sk in Slovak; Matúšova 12; r 2300-29505k) On a wee winding street en route to the castle, this pretty little lodging has a primo location and patio. Many of the rooms have sloped ceilings and skylights, some have a *maželska postel* (literally 'marriage bed'; one queen mattress instead of two twins), a rarity in Slovakia.

Eating

A couple of pizza places on Mierové and Štúrovo vie for your favour; they're really much the same.

Restaurant Lánius (☎ 744 1978; Mierové nám 20; mains 90-1905k) The rustic setup – creaking beams, a wood fireplace – matches the hearty Slovak fare. Pass by the dining room at the front; the one up the stairs at the rear of the courtyard is more fun.

Pivnica u Sanera (J Braneckého 15; breakfast 35-685k, mains 95-1655k; ☎ 8.30am-10pm) Specialities from different Slovak regions add flavour to the cellar-restaurant menu: the Liptov schnitzel is topped with onions and bacon.

For a snack, you can grab a takeaway kebab wrapped in *langoš* (fried bread) from **Bistro Central** (Štúrovo nám 10; mains 42-865k; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4am Fri, 7pm-4am Sat), or if you crave

something sweeter go to **Čokoládovňa Čokoladu** (Chocolate Café Chocolate; ☎ 0903480318; Štúrovo nám 7; cakes 30-1105k; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 1-8pm Sun).

Drinking

The pedestrian squares have several good cafés and bars.

Steps Pub & Bar (☎ 744 6252; Sládkovičova 4-6; ☎ 10.30am-1am Sun-Thu, till 4am Fri & Sat) The ground-floor pub has imported beer on tap. Upstairs, the bar attracts a beautiful, college-age crowd.

Jamm Club (Štúrovo nám 5; ☎ noon-1am Mon-Thu, till 3am Fri, 2pm-3am Sat, 2pm-1am Sun) Red-and-black painted walls make this cellar-club seem extra dark, if that's possible. Live jazz and blues alternate with '70s and '80s disco nights.

Festivals & Events

Eight stages, circus tents, camping grounds, a dance tent, hundreds of WCs: **Bazant Pohoda Festival** (www.pohodafestival.sk) is the largest music festival in Slovakia. Bands come from 15 countries, including Ireland, the US and France to play here. Jazz, pop-rock, classical, electronica, even breakdance is represented over one frenetic weekend in July (10995k for a two-day ticket).

Getting There & Away

The train is the quickest and most cost-efficient way to get here. Eleven fast trains on the main line from Bratislava (1805k, two hours, daily) stop in Trenčín before continuing on to Žilina (1805k, 1½ hours) and Košice

CASTLE HUNTING

Look up at the cliffs as you travel along almost any valley in Slovakia and you'll start to notice the stony manmade shapes rising out of the rocks. Castles and ruins abound in this country. Some of the most well known and accessible are listed in this book; a few of these have been restored, but there are dozens more that are still in ruins.

The castle system in Slovakia began in the 12th century when the Turks first threatened Hungary (of which Slovakia was a part). Defences were bulked up after the Turks later took control of Budapest, in the 16th and 17th centuries. As the danger from invaders abated, and fire caused damage, the stony beasts were abandoned, left to rot in skeletal form. And there they lie today.

So, get yourself a national map, pick one of the ruin symbols and start hiking. There's almost always a marked trail to take you where you want to go. The reward for a hearty climb might be only an ancient hearth, or the outlines of rooms in ruin, but there are always great views from these defensive sites.

Several sources can help in your quest, including *111 Castles*, by Vladimír Bárta, and the VKÚ map and booklet *Hrady, zámky, kaštiele*, which has explanatory English text. The green hiking maps from VKÚ are always good. Also check out www.castles.sk. Write and tell us which ones you've conquered and which you liked the best – happy hunting!

(420Sk, four hours). Intermediate stops include Nové Mesto nad Váhom (52Sk, 25 minutes), Piešťany (76Sk, 40 minutes) and Trnava (118Sk, one hour).

TRENČIANSKE TEPLICE

☎ 032 / pop 5000

This sedate spa town in the Teplička valley, 14km northeast of Trenčín, has some 19th-century buildings and lots of trees, but few of the spa's services are available unless you're part of the Slovak health system and have a doctor's referral. The *Trenčín-Trenčianske Teplice* (1:10,000) map lists trails for hiking the surrounding hills.

The train station is near the post office on Šrobárova, which runs north and parallel to the main road, Kúpeľná. There's no information office in town, so stop by the Cultural Information Centre in Trenčín before you come. At the end of June the town hosts **Art Film** (www.artfilm.sk), a small independent film festival.

The opulent 1888 Turkish-style **bath house** (hammam; Kúpeľná), opposite the Pax sanatorium, is now part of the men's changing room for the spa. The **thermal swimming pool** (termálny bazén; ☎ 651 4728; adult/child 100/50Sk; ♿ entry at 9am, 10am, 11am, 12.30pm & 1.30pm) is open to the public only on Sundays and on a first-come, first-served basis at the given hours.

Art Film Restaurant (TĽ Masaryka; mains 70-130Sk) has meals named after film stars.

A train ride between Trenčín and Trenčianske Teplice requires a switch to a narrow-gauge rail in Trenčianska Tepla and can take up to an hour; it's much easier to take the bus (14Sk, 15 minutes, hourly).

NITRA

☎ 037 / pop 87,570

The first Christian church in the Czech and Slovak Republics, if not all of Central and Eastern Europe, was founded here. Nothing remains today of that original structure (or if it does, it hasn't been uncovered yet), but Nitra is still known for its churches. The largest town in West Slovakia is a fairly quiet place neatly split between the upper town, with its fortified houses of worship and cobblestone streets, and the lower town. Further out, modern, industrialised Nitra has developed.

History

The Celts inhabited this site centuries before Nitra became a principal seat of the Veľká

Moravia (Great Moravian Empire) in the 800s. Atheistic, but crafty, Prince Pribina built the first Christian church in Slovak Lands, c 830. In 1302 religion took over completely: the Nitra bishops assumed feudal hegemony of the region, which lasted for almost five centuries.

The Ottoman Turks took southern Hungary in 1526 at the Battle of Mohács and pushed north occupying more and more territory until southwestern Slovakia was on the front lines of the Turkish Wars. Nitra was hit in sporadic attacks, fighting was especially tough during the Fifteen Years War (1591-1606). During the 19th century, industrialisation set in. Recently, most of Nitra's money has been pumped into the sprawling Agricultural University and the surrounding Agrokomplex Exhibition Halls, the largest series of convention centres in Slovakia.

Orientation

Beneath what remains of the castle fortifications is the former clerical enclave called the upper town (Horné mesto). Southward are the remnants of the lower town (Dolné mesto), centred on the grandiose Svätoplukovo nám. The lower town's axes – Štefánikova and Štúrova – cross beside the big district market. The bus and train stations are 500m southwest of the lower town centre.

Information

I Net (Štefánikova 46; per hr 60Sk; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat, noon-8pm Sun)

Information Centre NISYS (☎ 741 0906; www.nisys.sk, www.nitra.sk; Štefánikova 1; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) The usual info, plus guide service and sightseeing tours.

Knihkupectvo pod Vrškom (☎ 652 6546; Kupecká 7) Excellent bookstore.

Main post office (Svätoplukovo nám)

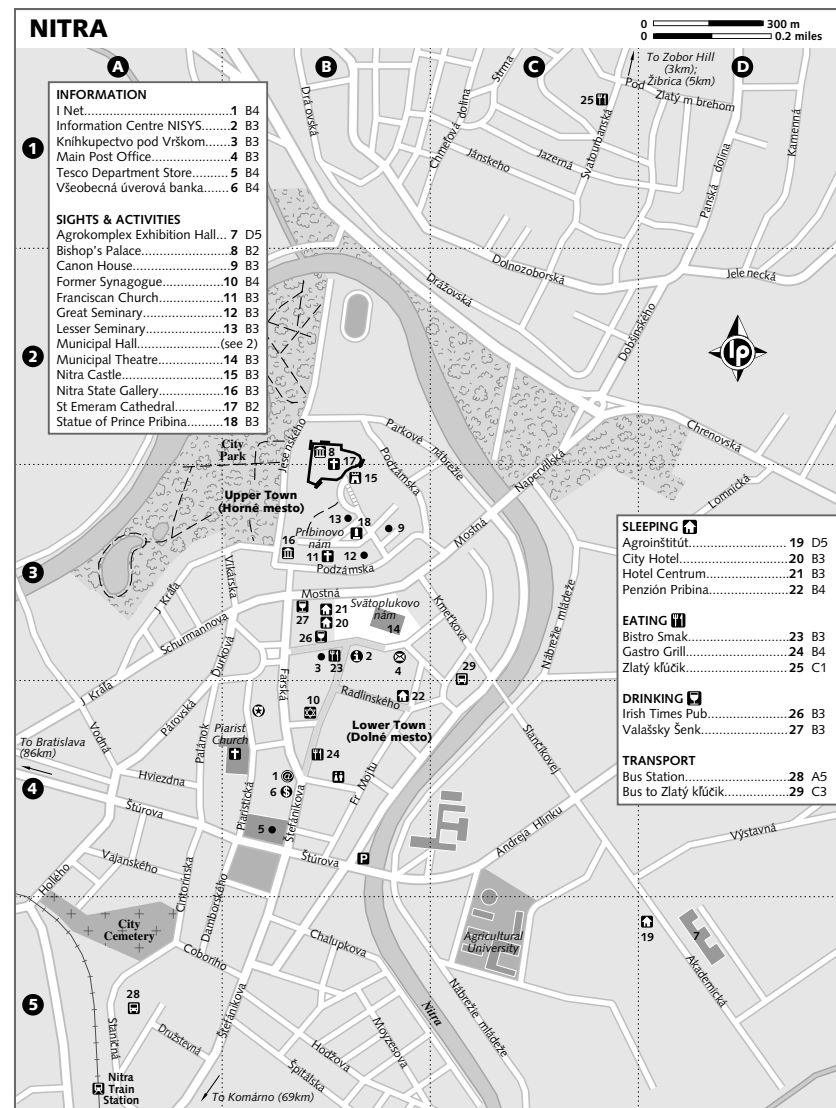
Tesco Department Store (Štefánikova 48) ATM, grocery store, café, everything.

Všeobecná úverová banka (VÚB; Štefánikova 44) Exchange office and ATM.

Sights & Activities

NITRA CASTLE

Actually, castle may be a bit of an overstatement. There's no palace as such, just a series of five baroque bastions and walls enclosing an ecclesiastical complex. Three small but beautiful churches inside are collectively known as **St Emeram Cathedral** (Katedrálny Biskupský



Chram sv Emerama; ☎ 772 1724; admission free; ♿ 9am-noon & 2-4pm Oct-Apr, 9am-noon & 2-6pm May-Sep) The oldest of these is **St Emeram Church** (Kostola sv Emeráma), a tiny 11th-century Romanesque rotunda, to the right of the anteroom. Try your luck; it's not always open. Some sources say parts of Prince Pribina's original church were incorporated into the rotunda.

At the rear of the anteroom and up the stairs is the 1642 **Lower church** (Dolný kostol), a dark, vaguely lopsided room with a remarkable marble relief of Christ being taken down from the cross. Up more stairs you'll find the **Upper church** (Horný kostol), completed in 1355 but filled now with baroque gilt and red marble, a massive organ gallery, and frescoes and

paintings everywhere. West of the cathedral, peek into the courtyard of the 18th-century **Bishop's Palace**. It's not open to the public.

UPPER TOWN

At the top of Farská, in the 19th-century District hall (Župný dom), recast in 1908 in handsome Art-Nouveau style, is the **Nitra State Gallery** (☎ 772 1754; www.nitrianskagaleria.sk; Župné nám 3; adult/student 40/20Sk; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) representing modern Slovak artists.

Through an arch to the gallery's right, the road bears right past the 17th-century **Franciscan church** (Františkánsky kostol) and former monastery into Pribinovo nám, a sloping square with a small garden, whose baroque and neo-Renaissance façades glower at a modern **statue of Prince Pribina**.

Across the whole south side of Pribinovo nám stretches the 18th-century neoclassical **Great seminary** (Veľký seminár; ☎ 772 1743; 🕒 visits by appointment only), which in postcommunist times is once again serving its intended function. Its library, opened in 1877, holds one of the more impressive book collections in Slovakia. The statue of Atlas that supports the corner of the ramshackle **Canon House** (Kanoňa; Samova 16), an 1820 bishops' residence, appears on the labels of the local beer, Corgon. Atlas' toes have been polished where local seminary students touch them for good luck. Unfortunately the palace is in need of some serious TLC.

LOWER TOWN

Little is left of the medieval lower town on Svätoplukovo nám. The huge modernist **Municipal Theatre** sits across from the 1882 **Municipal hall** (Mestský dom), home to the tourist office and a dreadful museum.

Eight more churches are scattered around the centre. The heavy, distinctly Byzantine, 1911 **former synagogue** on Prí synagoga, sometimes hosts classical concerts in summer. You can arrange a visit, with audio-headset narration, through the information centre.

Festivals & Events

The **Agrokomplex Exhibition Hall** (www.agrokomplex.sk) hosts exhibitions throughout the year, the biggest of which is its international trade fair at the end of August.

Sleeping

Nitra has no private rooms, but the information centre has a comprehensive list of

university dorms that go for around 300Sk per person (open in July and August only). Prices go up citywide during Agrokomplex events.

Agroinštitút (☎ 653 3361; www.agroinstitut.sk; Akademická 4; s 700-1200Sk, d 820-1300Sk; 📄 📺 📺) The Agrokomplex Exhibition Hall comes complete with a basic convention hotel that has simple rooms. (TV is considered a luxury and costs extra.) It's about a 15-minute walk from the town centre.

Penzión Pribina (☎ 6515 754; www.penzionpribina.sk; Radlinského 15; s/d 1100/1500Sk; 📄) Plants enliven the guest rooms and the bar – just part of the attention paid by the young family owners. There are only six rooms, but each has wi-fi and a minifridge.

Side by side sit **Hotel Centrum** (☎ 655 4397; www.hotelcentrum.sk; Svätoplukovo nám 1A; s/d 1400/2500Sk; 📄) and **City Hotel** (☎ 652 1203; www.city-hotel.sk; Svätoplukovo nám 1; s/d 1600/2500Sk; 📄), and it's hard to tell them apart. Both are sleek and modern with all the latest gadgetry. Perhaps the former uses more primary colours, and the latter, well, it has a sauna and whirlpool.

Eating & Drinking

If you're self-catering, load up on groceries at the supermarket in the **Tesco Department Store** (Štefánikova 48).

Bistro Smak (☎ 652 6047; Štefánikova 2; mains 29-49Sk) College co-eds pour in all day to snack on *toast* (open-faced hot sandwiches) and hamburgers in this chrome-plated diner.

Gastro Grill (Štefánikova 33; mains 80-160Sk) An encyclopaedic range of Slovak specialities are served at Gastro Grill, at below-average prices. Locals highly recommend the place.

Zlatý klúčik (☎ 655 0289; Svätourbanská 27; mains 190-350Sk) Candlelight flickers off your wine glass as you gaze down into the ancient town at twilight. You have to head for the hills to dine in the best Continental-style restaurant in town (part of an upscale hotel). Take bus 10 from just off Kmeťkova to the residential neighbourhood below Zobor Hill.

For beer, try the ever-popular **Irish Times Pub** (☎ 741 3427; Kupecká 12; 🕒 8am-1am Mon-Thu, 8am-3am Fri & Sat, 11am-midnight Sun) or the macho sports bar **Valašský šenk** (Mostná 35; 🕒 2pm-4am Mon-Fri, 5pm-4am Sat, 5pm-1am Sun).

Getting There & Away

Buses bound for Nitra depart from Bratislava at least every half hour (117Sk, 1½ hours). Train travel to Nitra from most cities involves

multiple transfers; there is a direct train to/from Prievdzva (98Sk, two hours, six daily) near Bojnice castle.

KOMÁRNO

☎ 035 / pop 36,731

The cultural centre of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia lies at the confluence of the Danube and Waag rivers on their way into Hungary. Wander across the bridge and you are in Hungary. Roughly two-thirds of the local population speak Hungarian and all the signs are bilingual. During the last weekend of April and the first week of May the Komárno Days festival celebrates Hungarian and Slovak song and dance with wine and food on the square.

Other than the odd building that might be of interest and the chance to eat Hungarian food, the real reason to come here is simply to pass through. Domestic train fares on either side of the border are usually cheaper than international (about €14 to €28 Bratislava-Budapest direct, €6-10 for the total trip through Komárno).

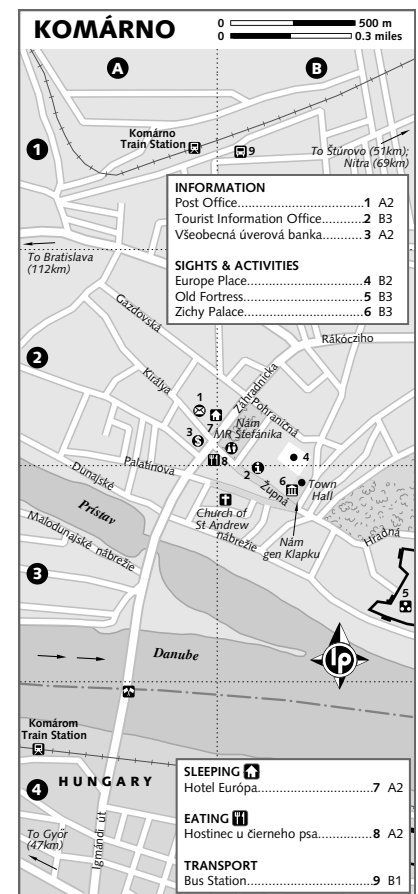
The adjacent train and bus stations are 15 minutes on foot north of the town centre, 20 minutes from the international border crossing. The **Tourist Information Office** (☎ 773 003; www.komarno.sk; Župná 5; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) is on the town's main pedestrian street, Župná, near several banks, such as **Všeobecná úverová banka**.

More than 20 architectural styles – from Icelandic to Irish – are represented in **Europe Place** (Nádvori Európy), a millennial monument finished in 2000. The buildings in this square contain some shops and cafés, but mostly offices and apartments. There are several small museums around town, including **Zichy Palace** (☎ 773 0055; Nám gen Klapku 9; adult/student 30/15Sk; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sat), which has displays on local Hungarian writer Jókai Mór and interesting 19th- and 20th-century photos of the town. The crumbling 16th-century **Old fortress** (Stará pevnosť; ☎ 0907178906), on the east end of the town peninsula, is open only for group tours.

If you have to stay overnight, utilitarian **Hotel Európa** (☎ 773 1349; www.hoteleuropa.sk; Nám Štefánika 1; s/d 980/1560Sk; 📄) is convenient, en route from the bus and train stations and the international bridge. **Hostinec u čierneho**

psa (Black dog pub; Nám MR Štefánika 13; mains 80-160Sk; 🕒 10am-11pm Mon-Thu, 10am-midnight Fri, 11am-10pm Sat), known as Fekete kutyak vendéglő in Hungarian, serves Slovak and Hungarian staples and cold *pivo* (beer); ask for *sör* in Hungarian.

It costs nothing to walk across the 1892 bridge linking Slovakia with Hungary. Seven buses (128Sk, 1¾ hours) and trains (126Sk, 2¼ hours) per day run between Bratislava and Komárno. Up to five buses per day run between Nitra and Komárno (91Sk, 1¼ hours). Up to 18 local trains per day leave from the Komárom train station on the Hungarian side (two hours, 1004Ft) for Budapest.



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